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## Upanishads and Teaching Methods

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Education is the process of facilitating learning, or the acquisition of knowledge, skills, values, morals, beliefs, and habits. Educational methods include teaching, training, storytelling, discussion and directed research. Swami Vivekananda said “Education is the manifestation of the perfection already present in man”. So education is something which is there within us it’s just how much we strive for it and how much we desire to learn something new.

Since ancient times India was a pioneer in the field of education. We can find many examples of traditional education in our Puranas and Upanishads. This paper examines the position of a teacher in the traditional education system as mentioned in Upanishads and how modern it is.

In this paper an effort is made to show how different methods of teaching are used in the Upanishadic education system.

### Questioning & Answering

In ancient times, there were no black boards, pen and paper. The dialogue in the form of Question and Answer between the Student and the Teacher played an important role in teaching.

Sri Shankaracharya, in his Commentary on Kenopanishad says that,

**शिष्याचार्य प्रश्नप्रतिवचन रूपेण कथनं तु सूक्ष्मवस्तुविषयत्वात् सुखप्रतिपत्तिकारणं भवति ।**

The method of questioning and answering between the Guru and the Student makes even complex topics like ‘Brahma Vidya’ (The Supreme knowledge) very easy to understand without much effort.

Sri Shankaracharya, in his Commentary on Bhagavadgita, himself raises new questions which are not asked by Arjuna to Lord Krishna and shows how the words of Sri Krishna form answers to them.

The name Prashnopanishad literally means that the Upanishad is of the form of Questions and answers. Here Students approach the Guru Pippalada and he preaches the knowledge by answering their questions. The similar kind of dialogues between Guru and Shishya can be seen in Chandogya and Brihadaranyaka Upanishads too.

We have suppressed the natural inquisitiveness of a child since childhood by silencing them forcefully, but, asking doubts, questions (inquisitiveness) plays an important role in Education. Home schooling and No schooling concepts emphasize these aspects. This shows how scientific our Traditional system is.

## Experimenting

**Dr Mace**, A famous Child psychologist and Educationist says that “The seat of memory is not in the mind, But in the muscular system. We learn by doing”.

A famous proverb in Japan says

‘You tell me, I listen. You show me, I remember. But you make me do, I never forget’.

This method of teaching through experiments is a very common form in Upanishadic pedagogy. In Chandogya Upanishad, we find that to demonstrate that The Brahman (The Supreme thing) is subtle, the Guru orders the students to bring a Fig fruit and break it. After breaking it in several stages the Guru illustrates how only a very miniscule part of the seed remains. The Guru then shows how a huge tree exists in this miniscule part and uses this as an analogy to teach that this huge universe is born of the subtlest Brahman.

In the same Upanishad to demonstrate that The Brahman is Omnipresent, the Guru orders the students to bring salt and mix it with water. Then he asks him to taste the upper part of the water. It was Salty. The same was with the middle and bottom layers. The water was Salty. Just as salt is present in all parts of the water, so is Brahman as Omnipresent.

Another instance brings out the nature of mind through an experiment. To teach Shwetaketu about the working of the Mind, his father Uddalaka orders him to fast for 15 days. During that period, his memory was lost. Then he advises to gradually increase the intake of food. Thereafter he regains his memory. Thus he demonstrates that the large part of the Food is excreted, the subtle part is gained as energy by the body and the very subtle part becomes the mind. Hence, by this experiment the importance of mind was preached.

## Giving Examples

दध्नः सोम्य मथ्यमानस्य योऽणिमा स ऊर्ध्वः समुदीषति तत्सर्पिर्भवति । एवमेव खलु सोम्यन्नस्याश्रमानस्य योऽणिमा स ऊर्ध्वः समुदीषति तन्मनो भवति ।

The butter is obtained from the Curd by the process of Centrifugation. The principle behind this process is that the denser particles are forced to the bottom and the lighter particles stay at the top when spun rapidly. When the butter is heated, Ghee is obtained. In the same way, the subtle form produced from the food becomes the Mind in individuals.

स यथा दुन्दुभेर्हन्यमानस्य न बाह्यान् शब्दान् शक्नुयात् ग्रहणाय । दुन्दुभेस्तु ग्रहणेन दुन्दुभ्याघातस्य वा शब्दो गृहीतः

To demonstrate how to control senses in order to realise The Brahman the following illustration is given. When Trumpets and Drums are beaten no other sound could be heard. But how to stop this sound? When there is no drum or no one to beat the drums then there is no sound. Similarly the sense organs have to be shut to allow the realisation of Brahman.

## Repetition/ Recalling

In Chandogya Upanishad the great statement 'Tattvamasi' (Thou art you) has been repeated 9 times.

Repetition plays a major role in teaching. Repetition is a key learning aid because it helps transition of a skill from the conscious to the subconscious. Through repetition, a skill is practiced and rehearsed over time and gradually becomes easier. Another important factor in learning is the ability to make connections to previously learned knowledge.

## Concept formulation and application

This method is widely used in teaching of Science and Mathematics.

In Taittiriya Upanishad the definition of Brahman is given as

**सत्यं ज्ञानम् अनन्तं ब्रह्म**

Applying this formula to five sheaths (Panchakosha) that consist of the corporeal body, the subtle body made of the organs, breaths, mind and intellect and the causal body and negating them that they are not The Brahman. This is in accordance with the principle of Reductio-Ad-Absurdum (Reduction to Absurdity)

In the same Upanishad a similar method is employed to arrive at the knowledge of Brahman. The nature of Brahman is defined as

**यतो वा इमानि भूतानि जायन्ते । येन जातानि जीवन्ति । यत्प्रयन्त्यभिसंविशन्ति । तद्विजिज्ञासस्व । तद्ब्रह्मेति ।**

“Brahman is 'The One' (The Supreme thing) from which every particle/animal takes birth, the born live on, moving towards which merge in it. Know it.” Sage Brughu through his

great penance applies this definition to the five sheaths and negates them that they are not The Brahman. And ultimately arrives at the Truth.

## Collective Participation – Seminar

In Chandogya Upanishad there are several instances where many ancient sages like Prachinashala, Satyayajna, Indradyumna, Jana, and Budila, frequently gathered together to discuss about the concept of The Supreme thing.

In Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, King Janaka had called a Court's council to debate on the nature of Brahman and decide on 'who is the greatest Jnani?'

Thus we find several methods of teaching are employed in the Upanishads to make the learning effective and all these do not differ from the most modern methods employed even in the modern education system.

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